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Censoring American Scientists

Government interference in the marketplace is anathema these days, unless it happens to be the marketplace of ideas. Then, it seems to the Pentagon at least, government interference is a wholly defensible concept.

The Defense Department last month blocked the delivery of about 100 scientific and technical papers at an international convention on optical engineering in San Diego.

The intrusion was done ham-handedly, in a last-minute demand for compliance with clearance rules that some contributors had not even been sure they had to consider. To avoid the chance of a legal violation, many speakers withdrew their papers. About one in six of the scheduled papers was not delivered.

The Pentagon was afraid that some of the papers — concerning research on such subjects as laser communications and infrared optics — could be of use to the Soviet Union, some of whose scientists were attending the conference.

The Pentagon's action was only the most egregious, recent example of the administration's efforts to restrict the flow of unclassi-

fied technical data beyond the United States. Export laws passed in the 1970s are being interpreted so broadly that virtually every piece of work done in the United States could be restricted or prohibited.

President Reagan has also signed an executive order on security classification which not only makes it easier to classify information, but also to keep it classified.

There is a real concern that the Soviet Union uses American science and technology to its own advantage, but such use is a testament to the fruitfulness of free inquiry and free exchange of information which have generally characterized American science.

To inhibit freedom unnecessarily — when no clear and direct national security interest is at stake — might well foil the Soviets. But it also would sap the dynamism that has made American science and technology the most innovative in the world.

The dependence of the Soviet scientific enterprise should tell our government that only sterility is encouraged by a policy of secrecy and suppression of information.